THE ECONOMICS OF FAITH
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Psalm 82
Amos 8:1–12
Luke 10:25–37

"But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone,
they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities." Acts 16:19 (NRSV)

God's message is never: Turn away from this sinful world and find me somewhere else.
God's message is always: Immerse yourselves in this sinful world that so desperately needs
words and acts of healing, and you will find you are not alone, for I am already there,
summoning you to help me.

The Bible is a very earthy book because God is a very earthy God.

Robert McAfee Brown
Spirituality and Liberation

Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology and social theory at Swarthmore College, walked into the local Gap to purchase a pair of blue jeans. Now Schwartz is middle-aged, so he was probably already feeling a little out-of-place. And his discomfort was multiplied when the clerk asked if he wanted slim fit, easy fit, or relaxed fit; regular or faded, stone-washed or acid-washed; button fly or regular. All he wanted was a pair of jeans, and what happened next is what happens to me standing in line at Starbucks, rehearsing in my mind the list of adjectives and nouns I will need to say in order to get a cup of coffee: Grande — Breve — Iced — Latte, clearly and in sequence. I always get a little panicky, and my choices are mundane compared to the people around me who are ordering exotic combinations of double and triple this and that, skim milk, soy milk, no whipped cream, decaffeinated. Standing at the counter at the Gap, Professor Schwartz concluded that he was spending much longer in the store than he planned, "investing time, energy, and no small amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and dread." He finally chose easy fit. Being an academic, he started to process

and evaluate his experience. His next stop was the supermarket, and now energized, he made a loose inventory: “85 varieties of crackers, 285 of cookies, 230 different soups, 120 pasta sauces, and 175 kinds of salad dressing, and he began to suspect that at some point ‘choice no longer liberates.’ It might even be said to tyrannize” (“Burden of Choice,” *Christian Century,* 13 July 2004).

The book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* is receiving a lot of attention. What got me was the author’s analysis that “there are a lot of people walking around, really, really dissatisfied with their lives and unable to put their fingers on what it is that’s so troublesome.”

Could it be that we have too much? That we have too many choices? That the “marketization” of our economy, our culture, our values is a big mistake? That the transformation of our life as a nation and our aspiration to transform the world into a global marketplace driven by market forces alone is not a very good idea? William Willimon at Duke says it has already happened. American culture, he says, is a supermarket, and citizen has been redefined as consumer. A thoughtful feature in the *Times* this morning discussed how airports have been transformed before our eyes into shopping malls and that part of the reason is that nothing makes us feel more safe and secure than shopping.

Evidence that “more is less” is accumulating from other sources, health care and medicine, for instance. Slowly the irony is dawning on us that we are the first people in history for whom “Too much food is a menace instead of too little.” A recent editorial pointed out that the only threat to our health greater than smoking is obesity. “Our lives are characterized by too much of a good thing,” the article concluded, “too much to eat, to buy, to watch, to do, excess at every turn.” (See “All This Prosperity Is Killing Us,” *New York Times*, 14 March 2004)

Prosperity turns out to be a mixed blessing. There are paradoxes that accompany progress. Quality of life stubbornly refuses to be defined by consumption no matter how eloquently advertisers try to convince us.

Ironically, we now know that for some reason clinical depression rises along with our standard of living.

Even economic and business leaders are weighing in. This sermon really began when I read a speech delivered to the Chicago Commercial Club by William McDonough, Chairman of the Public Company Accounting Board, an entity created by Congress to oversee auditors of public companies in response to the rash of accounting scandals. Mr. McDonough was an executive with First Chicago and a member of this congregation before moving to New York to become President and CEO of the Federal Reserve

Bank. He is a banker, a businessman, and his speech startled the local business community. He said that ten years ago the American economy was the model and envy of the world, strong, flexible, innovative. But then, he said, American business leaders “got confused and their moral compass stopped working.” He illustrated by underscoring the widening gap between CEO compensation and the compensation of the corporation’s employees.

In 1980, the average large company CEO made 40 times more than the average employee of the company. Comparable figures in other industrial nations are 20 to 1, down to Japan’s 10 to 1. Twenty years later, in 2000, the ratio between CEO and employee compensation had ballooned in this country to 400 to 1. “There is no economic theory, however farfetched, which can justify such an increase,” Mr. McDonough said. “In my view it is also grotesquely immoral.”

And then Mr. McDonough asked the critical question: Is there some compass that should guide us besides the market, more profits, make as much money as we can? He cited Kofi Annan’s recent statement that “at the center of all the great religions of the world is each person’s responsibility for others” and his own Christian and biblical mandate to love God and neighbor as self. Mr. McDonough told the gathered business leaders to go to church or synagogue or mosque and examine themselves. “It doesn’t require a theologian,” he said, “just the personal integrity to ask whether or not I am loving my neighbor.”

In fact, the Bible has a great deal to say about these matters: about economics and economic justice and public policy and personal behavior. In fact, it’s hard to miss, although we do a pretty good job of selective editing and avoidance, because it makes us uncomfortable.

The Psalter reading this morning, Psalm 82, tells about a remarkable meeting. It is a very old psalm; the context is the polytheism of the ancient Middle East. The God of Israel has convened a meeting of the gods and proceeds to dress them down, scold them, for ignoring economic justice. “Give justice to the weak and the orphans,” God says. “Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute; rescue the weak and the needy.” Justice, here at the very beginning of our faith tradition, is a central and powerful mandate, a moral foundation, and it is defined as taking care of the poor, the weak, the needy. God apparently intends all to have access to the resources that make life possible. Furthermore, injustice will ultimately destroy the world, an interesting thought that occurs to me, I confess, every time I drive down Division Street and see the appalling remaining buildings of Cabrini-Green in which we have been warehousing poor people for fifty years.

Deep in the biblical tradition is an absolute moral imperative to treat the poor with decency, respect, and generosity, not only in acts of personal compassion, but in the way society itself is structured. It's the last part that makes us uncomfortable, and no one articulates it more clearly than the prophets, particularly Amos. Amos makes us squirm. In fact, Amos made his contemporaries so uncomfortable he was a kind of social pariah. The king even sent his favorite priest to Amos one time to order him to leave the kingdom and go prophesy somewhere else. Speaking truth to power is never popular.

The passage from Amos we heard this morning contains some of the most disturbing words of scripture. Amos is sure that something terrible is about to happen to his beloved nation. Judgment is coming. God's judgment. And the problem is the oppression of the poor and the rampant greed and corruption of the merchant class. It's the accounting scandal all over again. Merchants are toying with the value of the currency—inflating it and, at the same time, reducing the value of the standard weight measurement in the market place: "the merchants are making the ephah small and the shekel great." Sounds like Enron or like oil companies conspiring to reduce production in order to keep the price of gasoline high.

A part of the history of the early Christian church is the story of faith colliding with economic injustice. The first Christian missionaries on European soil, Paul and Silas in the Greek city of Philippi, about 50 A.D., confront a young slave girl, demon-possessed, mentally ill, delusional, schizophrenic. It's a great story in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. The girl is entertaining; she says funny things, makes outrageous predictions about the future. Her owners are marketing her—in fact, making money from her pathetic condition, renting her out, as it were, as entertainment for traveling salesmen. The young girl is a slave to her mental illness and to her owners' greed. So when Paul and Silas cure her, her owners are furious. The local chamber of commerce goes into action; Paul and Silas are seized and interrogated. Justice, freedom are also economic concepts, and vested interests are always threatened by them.

The same thing happens later when Paul is in Ephesus and his preaching interferes with the lucrative silver market. Ephesus is home to the goddess Artemis, and tiny sliver idols are a mainstay of the local economy. When Paul starts to preach, sales drop, and the silversmiths organize, and Paul lands in jail.

Finally, the beloved parallel of the Good Samaritan, so very familiar. A man is attacked, beaten, robbed, and left to die on the road to Jericho. Two religious officials see him, walk on by, on the other side of the road. They have their reasons. If he's dead, they aren't allowed to touch him. And besides they have an important committee meeting to attend in Jericho.

Along comes a Samaritan—a hated, reviled outsider to Jewish culture; a despised minority for reason of race, nationality, and religion. He sees the beaten man, stops, takes care of his wounds, loads him on his donkey, transports him to an inn, and pays for his care and treatment.

What inspired Jesus to tell this unforgettable story was a question, a very good question. A lawyer asked it: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turns the question back to him, and he knows the standard answer: “Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” “But who, Jesus, exactly who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks. Jesus’ answer is the parable of the Good Samaritan, who is the one who shows what neighbor-love looks like, and in the process, Jesus knocks down all the racial, ethnic, religious walls that separate people and oppress people and enslave people.

Someone said that if the Samaritan walked the same road the next day and again found a beaten, robbed victim by the road side, biblical morality and justice would require him not only to bind up the man’s wounds but to go directly to the police department and city council and start advocating for better protection on the road, a better, safer roadway.

Christian faith is a moral compass, and it takes moral courage to consult it and not ignore it. Christian faith mandates moral courage to see economic injustice and name it. There will always be resistance to that, because it leads to changed behavior and changed personal priorities and spending habits and voting patterns.

The newly elected Moderator of the General Assembly of our church, Rick Ufford-Chase, works in Mission, coordinating Presbyterian and ecumenical volunteers in Central America and on the Mexican–U.S. border. Rick tells us an unforgettable story about leading a group of thirteen American volunteers in a building project in a remote mountainous Guatemalan village. At the end of the day, the volunteers had to take public transportation back to the village where they were staying with Guatemalan families. Public transportation meant a rusty, old, beat-up Toyota minivan. There were already two men in the van. The thirteen Americans squeezed in, and a few miles down the road, the driver stopped to pick up two more men, one of whom had a one-hundred pound sack of corn. The Americans dreaded what might happen next. The farmer proceeded to hike the sack of corn up onto the roof of the Toyota, squeezed in, and off they went until the sack broke open and the corn spilled all over the road. Whereupon the driver stopped and invited his passengers to get out and help pick up the corn—every kernel—which they did. Rick said, “We can’t imagine an economy where every kernel of corn counts.”

Christian faith requires us to see need and injustice, to name it, and to do something about it. Nicholas Berdyaev, a Central European theologian, once said, “If I am hungry, that is a physical problem; if my neighbor is hungry, that is a spiritual problem.” It is so easy not to want to look at and see the horrific famine and genocidal civil strife in Sudan; the HIV/AIDS epidemic devastating Africa; the homeless, hungry poor on the streets of affluent American cities. But avoidance, silence, walking on by, are not alternatives for followers of Jesus.

And faith has political implications, as well. It is an election year. Already religion is an issue—and religious values. Both parties are looking to the religious community for support. Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners Magazine,* an evangelical journal, recently observed that so far “religion” in the campaign has been confined to “Ten Commandments in public court houses, marriage amendments, prayer in the schools, and abortions.” Suddenly the most visible moral/values issue is adding an amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning same-sex marriage. “What about the biblical imperative for social justice, for the God who lifts up the poor?” Jim Wallis is asking. What about the poor? What about health care and education, the two commodities the poor simply must have if there is any hope of rising from poverty, and neither one of which we seem able or willing to provide? We don’t need a marriage amendment. We do need social justice for all people, education and health care for poor people. Those are the real religious issues.

Jim Wallis cites an impressive new public opinion poll conducted cooperatively by Republican and Democratic consultants. An overwhelming majority, 78 percent, said that in deciding to vote for president, they would rather have a candidate’s plan for fighting poverty than a candidate’s position on gay marriage.

There is an undeniable and unavoidable Christian moral imperative about social and economic justice. And there is a powerful personal dynamic as well. We are more than consumers. We are citizens of this community, this country, citizens of the world. The one we know as Savior has torn down all the boundaries and barriers and told us over and over that we are all in this together, that we are responsible for one another, for neighbors near and far, for the neighbor he defined with elegant simplicity as the one who needs us.

This church aspires to be a neighbor, week in and week out, all year long. In the summer we provide a program for the children of Cabrini called Summer Day. One hundred plus children come here every day for educational enrichment, recreation, field trips, good food. Summer Day is a good place to be in the city. At the end of the Tutoring Program, one of our tutors asked her student what he was planning to do with his summer

vacation. His answer was stunning. “I’m not doing anything; just staying inside,” he said. When she asked why he planned to stay inside all summer, he said, “Simple: I live in a bad neighborhood and I don’t want to get involved with the gangs.”

Faith mandates seeing clearly, voting and spending responsibly, and giving generously from our abundance.

A good question, maybe the best question of all, prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan: “Teacher, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?” His amazing answer was, “Be a neighbor—for my sake; for Christ’s sake literally, see suffering and injustice; for my sake, for Christ’s literal sake, care about it, let it get inside your heart and soul; for Christ’s sake do something about it.

That’s what our Lord Jesus Christ said: “Do this and you will live!”

Amen.